

provision for these groups. However, the proposals do not carry through on this promise but fall far short of the measures required to provide the specialised service which these children need.

## **RATIONALE, GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND ISSUES OF QUALITY**

One of the striking features of the general debate on educational provision for young children, is the constant reference to ‘quality.’ The argument, continually, is that quality should be the guiding principle and defining note of an Early Education service and the barometer against which the service should be evaluated. Within this debate, there has been a persistent failure to consider the differentiated needs of children as determined by personal and family traits, and family and social circumstances, with an attendant failure to realise that there is a need to define quality in terms of ability to meet these differentiated needs in appropriate ways.

Within a general, agreed standard for all children, and in the context of agreed principles of early development, quality of early educational provision will be constituted in different ways for different children according to the imperative to meet individual children’s needs. For vulnerable children, quality early educational experience will require the provision of specific intervention programmes which will include the standard features of age appropriate provision but will also be required to conform to particular criteria for appropriateness relative to the specific needs of the target group. Without a concern to equate quality with the provision of maximum individual opportunity to develop and progress in the early years, it is difficult to interpret the general commitment to quality as anything other than rhetoric.

The White Paper also underpins its discussion with a commitment to quality. Indeed, it identifies this as one of the guiding principles of the Department’s strategy for Early Years provision (p.15). The heartening matter here is that the White Paper acknowledges the need to define quality from the perspective of meeting children’s needs. This becomes a particularly significant point when taken together with the follow up statement which is that the White Paper seeks to achieve lasting educational and developmental benefits for children and interprets the notion of quality also in the context of this objective.

## **THE PROMISE**

So far in the discussion, there is room for optimism in that the rationale outlined in the document appears to be consistent with, and could be interpreted as, an

intention to ensure provision for all children aged 0-6 years at whatever level is required to support their development and educational achievement. At this point then, it might be expected that the nature of the Department's involvement will be related to a continuum of need, reaching the fullest possible levels of involvement for those children whose needs are greatest, and holding out the promise of a comprehensive early intervention service to at-risk and vulnerable children. The question now is whether the strategies proposed in the document will provide for a tangible and satisfactory working out of this promise.

## **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES FOR AN EARLY EDUCATION SERVICE**

As stated earlier, the White Paper identifies (i) a commitment to quality as a guiding principle in formulating policy on early childhood education. It identifies a further three principles also in this regard. These are: (ii) the wish, where possible, to build on existing provision; (iii) the intention that implementation would be on a phased basis allowing the system adequate time for preparation; and, (iv) a commitment to achieving progress through a process of consultation (p.15). Together with this modus operandi, the White Paper also identifies the key elements of provision which will be the focus of Department scrutiny in determining whether provision meets "defined quality standards" (p.51). These are curriculum and methodology, qualifications and training.

In relation to the guiding principles outlined, principles (iii) and (iv) seem unlikely to be contentious in that the phased introduction of change, and a commitment to consultation, seem to be appropriate and necessary elements in the development and implementation of policy on the scale required for this population. The concerns to be addressed in this paper relate to the first two principles, that is, the commitment to quality and the commitment to building on existing provision.

## **BUILDING ON EXISTING PROVISION**

What is clear from the White Paper is that for the majority of children under four, the intentions outlined above will be manifest in the form of attempting to ensure an appropriate educational dimension in children's Pre-school, Play Group or Crèche experience. The provision of curriculum, the introduction of a system of inspection, and the designation of suitable qualifications and training programmes, are the principal concerns in relation to appropriateness in the mainstream pre-school sector and the principal mechanisms through which the Department intends to monitor quality here (pp.54-59). The guiding principles

outlined above are probably expected to fit most easily, and to find most welcome expression, in this established area of provision.

## **THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL PROVISION**

However, there is a strong case to be made for a radical development in early years services in the form of universal provision for 3-year-old children within the primary school sector. For the DES, this would make for a much more comprehensive and coherent involvement than that outlined above and it is regrettable that by stating a principle to build on existing provision only, the White Paper makes no contribution to any discussion in relation to this more constructive option. Such provision would allow the possibility for an appropriate, continuous and coherent programme of early education for all children including children from the target groups identified for special focus by the White Paper. Here the developmental areas which are the focus of learning for 3-year-olds, and the features of teacher/child interaction which characterise teaching and learning with this age group, would be carried through to the older children in terms of curricular emphasis and teaching styles. Within such a framework, early education within the Primary School would be conceptualised as spanning the 3 to 8 years age group. The principles of the Revised Primary School Curriculum and the approaches to teaching and learning advocated by it for the 4 to 8 years age group are compatible with this proposal.

## **CHILDREN AT RISK OF SCHOOL FAILURE**

This framework would provide a structure for meeting the needs of children at risk of school failure. These children comprise the broad group of children who are disadvantaged, including children in urban and rural disadvantaged areas, children of traveller families and children from other cultural minorities. In the context of an inclusive system of provision for 3-year-old children within the Primary sector, children at risk of school failure could be targeted for structured interventions, focusing specifically on individual, identified needs and targeting the critical areas of language, cognition, and social/personal development. Equally, within this system it would be possible to provide for follow through interventions throughout the early years of primary school.

The established body of research literature on intervention for children at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage (Kellaghan, 1977; Guralnick, 1997; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Bryant & Maxwell, 1997), points a clear direction in terms of the need for structured educational interventions, targeting the key areas

of development which are the foundations for later academic achievement and characterised by intensive, highly focused adult/child interaction. Equally, the literature stresses the need to secure gains from early intervention through the provision of follow through interventions through the years of primary schooling (Guralnick, 1997; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). The Rutland St. Project (1 school) and the Early Start Programme (40 schools), are examples of such a service . These programmes are part of mainstream provision in a specific number of designated disadvantaged areas. They are exceptional in the Irish system in that they are examples of the Department of Education and Science extending provision to 3-year-old children within the primary school sector. While these programmes offer inclusive early years provision to all young children in the catchment area, including traveller children and children with disabilities, they are available to a small minority of disadvantaged communities only. In the wider community, children who are disadvantaged avail of a variety of services, or none, depending on the involvement of local voluntary, community or private agencies.

## **THE EARLY START MODEL**

The Department of Education and Science provides funding for 54 pre-schools for traveller children (approximately 660 children). However, it does not take responsibility for curriculum design, for provision of teachers, or for the monitoring of standards in relation to this provision. Concern in relation to the structure, standards and delivery of existing educational provision to pre-school traveller children was a major issue of discussion at the *National Forum on Early Childhood Education* (Forum Secretariat, 1998) as was the question of provision for all disadvantaged children. The consensus then was that educational provision for traveller children should be modelled on, and of the same standard as, the Early Start Programme. The report on that forum records this consensus and makes very specific recommendations in relation to the needs of the travelling community and other minority groups (pp. 81-91), devoting a separate chapter to this discussion. The report also advises the extension of appropriate early intervention services to all young children in disadvantaged communities (pp. 72-80), again giving a chapter to this discussion.

The White Paper does not reflect this view of the need for radical development of services on behalf of young disadvantaged children. In this instance, the guiding principle to build on existing structures would seem to offend against the guiding principle of commitment to consultation.

## WHAT SHOULD TARGETING MEAN?

### Existing Commitments

In relation to direct involvement in the education of young disadvantaged children, the White Paper refers to the Department's existing commitments to the Rutland St. Project and to the Early Start Programme, and it includes also reference to its unregulated provision to traveller children. Here the White Paper indicates a willingness to continue with these forms of provision but implies that there will be no further development in relation to them. Rather, it proposes that the way forward for all children is to persuade the existing voluntary, community, and private sector providers, towards a better quality service by laying down criteria for *minimum standards* relating to curriculum, qualifications and inspection.

### Special Focus on Disadvantage

As has been pointed out, children who are disadvantaged are described in the White Paper as being targeted for special focus, and this special focus comes with the objective of supporting development and educational achievement through quality provision (p.15). Of course, this objective is valid for all children and the White Paper purports to pursue it also on behalf of all. However, the most obvious personal characteristic associated with the condition of disadvantage is school failure (Kellaghan, 1977; Kellaghan, Weir, Ó HULLacháin, & Morgan, 1995), resulting in restricted access to employment opportunity and to opportunity for success within the wider community. (Hannon & O'Riain, 1993; Ireland, 1997).

In the context of meeting these children's needs, quality must be defined in terms of the provision of a service which enables them to reach their achievement capabilities in relation to present developmental needs and future educational demands. For these children, achievement in the early years means reaching the levels of communicative competence and cognitive readiness, and acquiring the motivational skills and sense of one's self as a learner, which are the prerequisites for achievement through the years of primary schooling and beyond (Reynolds et al., 1996). It would be profoundly disturbing if the White Paper's suggested way forward were to be interpreted as the means of providing a quality early years service to this group of vulnerable children.

In the absence of any willingness to provide for these children within an inclusive context of primary education for all 3-year-olds, targeting can only be considered in terms of specific provision for these children, in structured programmes of Early Intervention, designed to meet individual, identified needs and delivered by

appropriately skilled teachers. This provision needs to be part of, or closely aligned to, existing State provision for primary aged children so as to allow for ease of transition and follow through interventions, providing continuity of curricular approaches and teaching styles.

### **Special Focus on Children with Disabilities**

Such targeted provision within the primary school sector must also be provided for young children with disabilities. Children with mild general learning disabilities are particularly at risk of non-identification or, misidentification (Telzrow, 1992) and are often assessed as needing specific learning support only after one or two years in primary school. Yet there is evidence that these children benefit particularly from early intervention (Garber, 1988; Campbell & Ramey, 1995). There is a high prevalence of children with mild general learning disabilities in disadvantaged populations (Garber, 1988). This fact increases the imperative to make appropriate provision in schools in disadvantaged areas. Targeted provision for these children requires educational settings in which curriculum and teaching styles can be adapted to provide the appropriate starting point for teaching and learning, and the degree of structure necessary to meet these children's needs.

As has been pointed out already, the Early Start Programme makes provision for children in a number of disadvantaged areas including children with disabilities, and it is to be expected that a number of children with mild learning disability will enter the Early Start Programme in any year cohort. The Resource Teacher Service is available to support children with disabilities in the primary sector from age four. In the context of an extension of targeted provision in disadvantaged areas, the Resource Teacher Service could be extended to support 3-year-olds with a range of disabilities in the pre-school classes.

Because of the proven need for intensive intervention for children with serious disabilities (Telzrow, 1992), the majority of 3-year-old children with identified disabilities need to receive intervention which targets their specific disability. For very young children with identified disabilities, support would need to be given to both children and parents in the home from the specialist visiting teacher service. Children would then attend specialist classes catering for a range of disabilities. These classes should be attached to main stream primary schools and could work in close cooperation with a special primary school, catering for children with that specific disability.

In areas of low density population, this specialist class could be attached to a designated school. In the context of a serious commitment to quality provision

which supports development and educational achievement, all 3-year-old children with identified disabilities, including children with severe and profound general learning disabilities, should have access to placement in such classes. One example of appropriate, existing provision that should be built upon, is the class for 3-year-old children in the Central Remedial Clinic in Dublin which caters for children with serious levels of motor impairment. This provision should be extended to other schools catering for children with this disability.

### **A Multi-Disciplinary Team Approach**

Adequate targeting of children with serious disabilities would require that the early educational provision would be informed and supported by collaboration with a multi-disciplinary team. On that team, the teacher would be a key professional contributing to the design and implementation of the specific educational component of the intervention. Again, with reference to the White Paper's concern for quality, and its objective of supporting development and educational achievement, the measure of quality should be the degree to which the provision is capable of meeting this objective in the context of addressing individual children's needs. From this perspective, an appropriate early intervention service for children with disabilities needs to offer provision which can accommodate to the varied and complex nature of disability and to the wide range of needs experienced by children with disabilities.

### **CONCERNS**

The White Paper is extremely tentative in its proposals for young children with disabilities. This approach might be interpreted as indicating a necessary caution in the face of a desire to provide a comprehensive and appropriate service, and a concern to first examine the complexities involved. In this regard, the proposal to establish data bases is a positive and necessary first step. Further, the rationale outlined in the document could be read as an intention to plan for direct state intervention on a carefully informed basis (p. 84). However, the discussion on provision is again prefaced with a statement of intention to build on existing services. While there is mention of a commitment, "in principle" and "where necessary" to establishing further classes for 3 and 4-year-olds (p. 91), the tentative nature of these proposals gives rise to real concern as to the commitment which underpins them.

An altogether much stronger message is communicated in relation to the definite proposal to provide "specialist advice" and "support" to providers who "run early childhood facilities" and who include children with special needs (p. 90). Indeed, the section which outlines the proposed intervention measures for children with

disabilities is largely concerned with intentions relating to the existing pre-school sector (pp. 90-91). This section suggests the depressing scenario of a wholly inadequate system evolving, where targeting for children with disabilities emerges only in the form of periodic advice from visiting specialist teachers, rather than the direct and sustained teaching required.

This structure and form of provision is in direct contradiction to that proposed during discussions at the *National Forum on Early Childhood Education* (Forum Secretariat, 1998). Here the relevant interest groups, including parents, the Irish Council for People with Disabilities and the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, presented an informed view on the need for direct state provision of early education, based on early assessment, identification, and specific planning of individual programmes of intervention. There was a strong emphasis on the levels of teacher expertise required and on the need to educate parents in their roles as members of the multi-disciplinary team.

## **SPECIALIST TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND TRAINING**

For young children whose development is delayed or impaired through environmental disadvantage or through disability, the key areas of early learning – language, cognition and personal/social development – are fostered through intensive adult/child interactions which match the teaching to the identified needs of the learner (Guralnick & Bennett, 1987; Telzrow, 1992; Guralnick, 1997). Here the teacher is concerned with providing appropriate challenge in terms of demands on the learner and this appropriateness is determined by the teacher's knowledge of the child's current levels of understanding, together with a clear perception of where the child is now capable of advancing to in any particular area of learning. There are additional elements in the expertise required and these relate to the relationship between learning and curriculum. Teachers must be able to assess individual children's progress in relation to identified objectives based on reasonable expectations for that child. Equally, they must also be able to interpret these points of progress in terms of development in the general population and expectations within a curriculum.

The points outlined above indicate that teaching children in the identified target groups requires serious levels of skill and expertise relating to every aspect of the teaching/ learning process. These levels of skill and expertise will be directly related to the children's developmental progress and achievement (Telzrow, 1992; Freidus, 1993; McCollum & Maude, 1994), and the presence or absence of them should be one of the crucial measures of quality in the service.



In the context of what is a compelling case for intensive, focused, programmes of early intervention where children are maximally engaged in structured programmes of learning, the White Paper is misguided in its principle of building only on existing provision. In doing so, it ignores the absence in that provision of the requisite levels of teaching skills and expertise which vulnerable 3-year-olds require. Equally, it ignores the need for a coherent, seamless system, that targets children across the pre-school and primary school age range. Such an approach does not serve the pursuit of quality as promised in the White Paper. In light of the requirements for quality outlined above, there is an inherent contradiction in proposing to deliver a quality service through reliance on existing structures.

### **INCLUSIVE SOCIAL SUPPORT MODELS OF INTERVENTION**

In tandem with specific, early education programmes, targeting for vulnerable children requires the provision of a web of additional supports involving family, school, professional and community partnerships (Guralnick, 1997; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). The specific educational intervention needs to come in the context of this web of support with interactive relationships existing between the various components in that web. Among the major research emphases emerging in the field of Early Intervention is an interest in the concept of the social support model (Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Here, intervention is conceptualized as an attempt to influence the complex interplay of factors, personal, family and social, which foster or inhibit child development by providing programmes which impact on crucial aspects of development but also target the family and community as the central, essential agencies affecting child development. The proposals outlined in the White Paper fall far short of attempting anything on this scale of awareness and commitment.

### **CONCLUSION**

The intention of the Department of Education and Science to become involved in the education of children under four should be a welcome development in early years provision in this country. In this paper, concern is expressed as to the specific nature of the involvement as forecast by the proposals outlined in the White Paper. This concern is particularly serious in relation to the needs of children who are disadvantaged and children with disabilities. While the White Paper records a commitment to making “quality” provision for these children, the concrete proposals contained in the document give cause for serious concern as to their adequacy in providing what would constitute an appropriate early intervention service. In this paper, quality is defined as the ability of an early education service to meet the developmental and educational needs of children

under four, including children who are disadvantaged and children with special needs; universal provision has been proposed as the context in which the DES can make the fullest provision for vulnerable children. In the absence of a willingness to make such inclusive provision, targeting will have to come in the form of interventions for specific groups within the primary sector. The White Paper also conveys a certain sense of unwillingness in this direction.

Hopefully, there is still room for optimism. The White Paper clearly indicates the Government's intention to establish the Early Childhood Agency which was advised in the Report on The National Forum (Forum Secretariat, 1998). This body will have responsibility for all matters relating to the development and provision of services for young children including the specific responsibility of providing for the target groups who have been the subject of discussion here. It is to be hoped that this body will pursue the principle of quality in the context of whether and how the system can meet the children's needs, rather than proposing to map the children's needs on to the existing, wholly inadequate system.

***Editor's note:** Since the time of writing, the Minister for Education and Science has appointed the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, to undertake a project to develop and coordinate early childhood education in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper and to advise the DES on priority issues in this area. Under joint management of both colleges, a Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education has been established at St. Patrick's College for the purposes of implementing this project. One of the main objectives of the project is to prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper.*

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